



The 21st Century School: Exam Periods

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Schools often turn to ISM Scheduling Consultants to help design student-centered schedules that support 21st century teaching and learning. The proposed schedule options are always different because of the particular combinations of time, people, space, and program unique to each school. However, certain best-practice recommendations are made to every school; one is the elimination of exam periods (those days when classes stop exclusively for the administration of exams that students take simultaneously and en masse). The traditional exam structure favors the 20th century modality where time is the constant and achievement is the variable. In the 21st century, [achievement is the constant and time is the variable](#).

Exam periods imply that a particular calendar date is the appropriate time for an assessment, and that a written, timed exam is the appropriate form of assessment—in every course, for every student. They equally imply that sorting students by their ability to perform on a particular date is good educational practice. We disagree and recommend that schools eliminate formal exam periods in favor of appropriate assessments (including a variety of formative and summative assessments) that make the most sense for the students.

While eliminating this traditional exam practice may be welcomed by many, others—particularly some Board members, parents, and faculty—may have doubts. The following list shows the primary arguments.

- The elimination of exam periods is an indication of decreased expectations and academic “rigor.”
- Students need to experience exam periods to prepare for the next level (middle school for upper school and upper school for college).
- Without midterms and final exams, we’ll have no way of knowing if the students mastered the material that was “covered” in the course.
- We suffered through exams and turned out okay.

ISM recommends that each school learning community consider the following directions.

- The goal is to create and maintain conditions that facilitate high levels of [student performance](#) throughout the year. ISM’s findings over more than two decades demonstrate that predictable, supportive conditions are strongly associated with consistent/enhanced student performance. When faculties succeed in creating high-predictability and high-support conditions, exam periods necessarily interrupt and interfere with those conditions. Exam periods inevitably contribute to fluctuations in predictability and support conditions, which are associated with fluctuations in performance.
- Exam periods significantly decrease the number of teaching days in the year. Typically, a week of exams also includes (or should include) preparation time, and thus two exam periods can lose from 10 to 20 days of teaching. If the midterm exam is held after the winter break (typically to ensure equal semesters), the three weeks between the break and the exam period are also effectively lost. This does not count the time for make-up exams.

- Preparing students for college means preparing them for a variety of assessment processes. Should students encounter traditional exam periods in college, these are not events that merit years of practice. Although most colleges still have exam periods, most do not require exams be given during the scheduled time, and more than 60% of professors opt for alternative assessments.¹
- There is no evidence that exam periods advance learning or retention. In fact, sleep studies and memory research show that the “cramming” that typically happens in preparation for exams is counterproductive. It is clear that students cram for the test and that long-term memory is rarely involved.²

Exam periods should not drive program; rather, teachers should design their curricula and then determine the most pedagogically beneficial time and way to assess students. In a 21st Century School, it may well be that individual classes are being assessed at different times, according to their needs and progress. The timing of major assessments should be thoughtful, intentional, and directly related to each specific course and students.

Train your teachers in best practices to develop summative and formative assessments that both challenge the students and facilitate learning. Provide them with ongoing collaborative time to develop such assessments and stipends to develop units over the summer.

Transitional alternatives include the following.

- *Middle school:* In lieu of yearly exams, give the students the experience of an exam period at the end of 8th grade, but not before.
- *Upper school:* Only administer exams in the spring; if you must have midterms, give them before winter break begins. Have half of the courses give traditional exams in the winter, with the other half using alternative assessments, and then rotate in the spring.

ISM Success Predictor No. 3 is “Interdisciplinary, flexible, and immersive curriculum/pedagogy.” Due in part to the power of instructional technology to make connections and to break through conventional subject-matter barriers, the student experience will become increasingly difficult to channel and circumscribe using 20th century models. This induces substantial modifications in pedagogy and in curriculum (teachers learning to teach in different, more flexible, interdisciplinary ways) and in approaches to learning (students learning in different, more fully immersed, interdisciplinary ways). This predictor also assumes learning groups based on mastery rather than age.

Assessment should follow suit.

¹ See ISM’s “College Student Assessment Study 2009,” available in the Research area of the ISM Web site at isminc.com/documents/research/students/ExamResearchSurvey09.pdf

² See “Optimizing Distributed Practice: Theoretical Analysis and Practical Implications,” *Experimental Psychology*, 56(4), 2009, 236–246.

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